

Bringing Effective PROFESSIONAL



BY SUSAN REESE

Career and technical education (CTE) teachers don't just talk the talk when it comes to lifelong learning. Through ongoing professional development they walk the walk, gaining a deeper understanding of the content they teach, staying informed of the latest research, and ensuring the skills they teach are aligned to the most current workplace standards. Professional development has long been a part of educators' lives, but the Internet has brought new ways for delivering it. While teachers may still participate in summer workshops, attend conferences of their professional organizations, and work toward advanced degrees, there are now many new sources of pro-

fessional development available to them.

In its April 2010 publication, "Professional Development for Secondary Career and Technical Education: Implications for Change," the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE) offers this definition of professional development: "Professional development involves comprehensive, sustained and systemic learning experiences that are based on identified needs of teachers, and result in improved instructional effectiveness and increased student achievement and performance outcomes."

NRCCTE notes that under this definition, examples of professional development include such activities as Web-based seminars and online training.

More Needed Than Ever

Under Perkins IV and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), today's CTE teachers are expected to integrate academic knowledge and technical skills to boost the academic achievement of their students, as measured by standardized tests and other measures of meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Meeting such challenges will likely require more ongoing professional development for CTE teachers—and more support from school and district leaders.

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) standards state that leaders at all levels should recognize quality professional development as a key strategy for supporting improvements in

DEVELOPMENT

to Educators



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the classroom. NSDC notes that leaders should make use of various electronic tools to support their learning, and should be familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of various electronic processes for themselves and others.

The tools of technology are only effective if accompanied by the knowledge of how to use them, and the NSDC standards address this issue as well, advocating that at least 30 percent of a school district's technology budget should be devoted to teacher development in the use of technology. NSDC notes that, "While collaborative, face-to-face professional learning and work are the hallmarks of a school culture that assumes collective responsibility for student learning, technol-

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ogy will increasingly provide a means for new and different forms of collaboration."

Although NSDC acknowledges that challenges may emerge as the use of electronic forms of collaboration increases, it also says, "Technology will enable

teachers and administrators from around the country and world to share ideas, strategies and tools with one another in ways that will dramatically increase the number of collaborative links among educators."

Where to Begin

For career and technical educators looking for quality online professional development experiences, the ACTE Web site is a great place to begin. There they will find Educatorcredits.com, a Web site developed in alliance with Eastern Oregon University (EOU) to provide convenient, high-quality graduate-level courses to busy teachers. EOU is a four-year university accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges.

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Educatorcredits.com includes hands-on projects, practical applications and real-world situations—and the courses are offered in an on-demand format so that teachers can set their own timelines. Professional development credits at the graduate level are awarded through EOU on a quarter system basis. In order for an online professional development experience to be beneficial, it must be easy to use, and the educator testimonials on the Educatorcredits.com site note that both ease and convenience are provided. As one teacher says, "I never got lost online as I have with other sites, and I was able to work through my class without any difficulties."

Professional development activities should also be meaningful and valuable, and not just empty credit hours earned to put on a resume. For example, the teachers who took the EOU courses say they learned strategies that they can actually

use in the classroom, as well as validating some of their own practices. One specific course mentioned by a couple of the teachers was very helpful for them in dealing with students with ADHD.

At the ACTE Web site, educators will also find Webcasts and Webinars about best practices, model programs, and issues and opportunities in CTE. NRC-CTE is another source of online professional development, because in addition to its research reports, its Web site also has a number of multimedia resources,

including Webcasts and podcasts. Recent topics have included curriculum integration and innovative ideas, including one on inquiry-based learning units developed with the Ohio Resource Center.

The National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTE) has produced Webinars on topics of importance to CTE educators—including Programs of Study, educating for sustainability in K–12 schools, and CTE and school counseling—and these can be accessed on the organization's Web site.

Statewide Support

Some states, such as Ohio, have tools to provide professional development for educators statewide. STARS (System to Achieve Results for Students) is a Web-based application that provides for planning and management of professional development and technical assistance pro-

grams for Ohio educators. Noting that it recognizes the need for as much efficiency as possible in times of limited resources, the Ohio Office of Career-Technical Education conducted professional development/technical assistance meetings during the 2009–2010 school year using Elluminate, which is an interactive online collaborative communications tool. Career and technical educators can view the recorded Elluminate sessions for the year, and there is even a practice session provided that can be used as a tutorial. Among the topics covered were Teaching Professions Portfolio Assessor Training, Career-Tech Communicators, Licensing, Perkins IV and Tech Prep.

The Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Professional Development Center (PDC) is a Web-based professional development planning resource for individuals and teams working in CTE. According to the PDC, it guides teachers, administrators, counselors and support staff through "progressively identifying and developing essential skills for a greater impact in job performance."

The first step the resource guides career and technical educators through is clearly defining and writing an effective goal. The PDC leads users through identifying and defining their professional development goals. Competency-based goals are explained, and measuring and determining goal attainment is detailed. The PDC Goal Form asks educators to think about tasks that can be completed to achieve their goals and prompts them to decide what specific performance indicators would help in goal attainment. The Oklahoma PDC also provides help for locating resources and mentors—including virtual mentoring. In addition, it is soliciting successful practices to showcase and be shared with other career and technical educators.

Online in Oregon

Before developing the Educatorcredits.com initiative with ACTE, Eastern

Oregon University already had a well-established program of online offerings.

"We are the only four-year institution in an area the size of Pennsylvania," said Carol Lauritzen, associate dean in the EOU College of Education, "and one of our hallmarks is the notion of access. We have teachers and other professionals in remote locations who would have to drive many hours to on-site professional development opportunities. It's incredibly important for people to continue to grow in their professions, so we are committed to access and affordability."

According to Lauritzen, a number of EOU's offerings to complete a bachelor's degree are online, and the Master of Science program is totally online. It isn't just the convenience of not having to drive long distances to be in a classroom that makes these programs so appealing. Many people live very busy lives that include working at their jobs and taking care of children, and Lauritzen has found that most of their online students access the program on weekends and after 10:00 p.m.

Some of those coming to the EOU program work in CTE. "In Oregon, anybody who works in CTE has to have credits in more traditional teacher preparation areas such as classroom management and curriculum design," says Lauritzen, "so we are willing and eager to provide that and help them meet the requirements needed to renew their licenses."

One of the few downsides of online professional development is that it makes it more difficult to have a personal connection between teacher and student as well as among students. "We try to use photographs and lately more video and podcasts in our online offerings," Lauritzen explains. "We try to make it as personal as possible, and we encourage student-to-student interaction as well."

As Lauritzen points out, people are turning to the Internet for things we never would have predicted years ago, and she expects it to continue to grow. "We're

becoming more sophisticated with what can be done online, with multi-site video conferencing, and real-time and asynchronous offerings," she says. "I think people will continue to be quite innovative and will do even more in this area."

A Cool Experience in Mississippi

Mississippi State University (MSU), one of ACTE's Educational Institution Members, has an online professional development opportunity for all Mississippi educators to receive Continuing Education



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Units (CEUs) through online delivery. Sessions include a wide variety of topics, including technology-based training, classroom management, and strategies for improving professional practice. Each session is developed and delivered by a C.O.O.L. (Certification of Online Learning) graduate. These sessions are not open entry, open exit, but are interactive, facilitator-led sessions and are aligned with National Staff Development Council and Southern Regional Education Board e-learning standards.

MSU offers the program through its Research and Curriculum Unit (RCU) and notes that the program is designed to provide information and training for teachers with the use of online tools. There are two components of the program: Online Professional Development Sessions and C.O.O.L. While there are no prerequisites for the Online Profes-

sional Development Sessions, C.O.O.L. participants must have completed basic and advanced Blackboard. C.O.O.L. is now part of licensure requirements for many of the CTE curricula areas. The RCU partners with the Office of Vocational Technical Education and Workforce Development at the Mississippi Department of Education, and the Professional Learning Department of the RCU provides various training and learning opportunities for secondary and postsecondary educators.

Marilyn Bowen is the RCU online learning coordinator and started the Online PD project six years ago. "I led Online PD Microsoft Word, and a colleague facilitated Online PD Microsoft PowerPoint," Bowen said. "When I experienced the excitement from the 30 teachers who jumped in with me, I was hooked! It was such an awesome opportunity to work

with Mississippi educators across the state at any time, anywhere. The success they felt as they completed the 15-hour session pushed me to want to offer more."

As Bowen notes, there are some clear advantages to online professional development, in addition to the 24/7 availability. There are no travel expenses, communication is ongoing, and the community of learners continues to evolve. The participants not only learn from the facilitators but from one another as well. Educators who participate in online learning are also more apt to use technology with their students.

Bowen has seen some challenges for teachers participating in online professional development, including a lack of technology skills and sometimes technology hardware or software. Some teachers may suffer from a fear of failure or a feeling of isolation. The quality of

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"To address the problem of feeling isolated, Bowen says, 'Peer-to-peer interaction as well as facilitator-to-participant interaction is a must. C.O.O.L. introduces online best practices, classroom management, and group work to ensure the participant feels involved in the session.'"



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online facilitators or instructors may be a concern. However, Bowen is quick to note that many of the challenges she faced six years ago have either lessened or disappeared completely. As we have all experienced, technology is great when it works, and frustrating when it doesn't. "Changing the culture to include embracing technology—issues or not—is a key to most challenges," says Bowen.

Bowen shares some of what she has learned over the past six years: "With the success of the original two sessions, I realized there was no way I could create or deliver enough online professional learning sessions as needed. So, to ensure high-quality online facilitators and up-to-date content, I created C.O.O.L. This 40-hour session focuses on the pedagogy of online instruction. The final project of C.O.O.L. is to create a 10-hour online professional development session in Blackboard. This project is peer reviewed, sent through editors, and then offered online. The participant who created the session is hired to facilitate the online session. Our online professional development catalog now has more than 100 titles."

Each of the original challenges Bowen cited has been addressed over the six-year existence of the program through changes that were implemented. Online professional development sessions focused on skill building to address the lack of tech-

nology skills, and the online facilitators take a major role in addressing the fear of failure of the participants. The quality of the facilitators/instructors is a vital component of the program, and Bowen notes that, "C.O.O.L. was created to help mold future online instructors. It is based on the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) National Standards of Quality for Online Courses. One of the standards states that an online instructor should be an online student first. C.O.O.L. allows the participant to move from student to instructor seamlessly."

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Bowen believes online professional development programs such as the one at MSU will only become more important in the future. "This is an exciting time in education, and technology plays and will continue to play a major role in delivery of instruction," she says. "Online professional development can only grow and become an integral learning opportunity for busy, life-involved, educators." ■

References

For more information and resources related to online professional development for career and technical educators, here are some Web sites to explore.

Association for Career and Technical Education
www.acteonline.org

Eastern Oregon University
www.eou.edu

Educatorcredits.com
www.educatorcredits.com

International Association for K-12 Online Learning National Standards of Quality for Online Courses
www.inacol.org/research/nationalstandards/

National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium
www.careertech.org

National Research Center for Career and Technical Education
www.nrccte.org

National Staff Development Council
www.nsdc.org

Susan Reese

is a *Techniques* contributing writer. She can be contacted at susan@printmanagementinc.com.

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